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'Mapfupa Angu Achamuka – My Bones Shall Rise' The Intellectual Legacy of Mbuya Nehanda of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article reflects on conceptual and theoretical issues pertaining to the study of African knowledge systems, with a particular focus on Spirit mediumship in Zimbabwe. The key arguments are that: (i) studying African phenomena, like Spirit mediumship and Ancestor worship using Western paradigms and languages constitutes a form of Western Spirit possession and Ancestor worship; (ii) theoretical and Western language choices impose Western meanings on unWestern realities, thereby excluding the vast majority of continental African people from meaningfully engaging in and contributing to knowledge production and dissemination; and, (iii) African Ancestors like Mbuya Nehanda that left a memorialized legacy have to be re-theorized as a way of dealing with hegemonic Western and postcolonial patriarchal renditions of history and about Indigenous knowledge systems in Africa.

Invoking the Ancestors

'Do not let your ancestors be praised by tongues they do not understand.' (Chenjerai Hove, *Bones*)

Svikai[1] nepano Midzimu Mikuru, svikaiwo nepano . . . Dzokai tiwane maridziro engoma dzebira, dzokayi tiwane matandavariro mumubvuri wegumbatiro yenyu. Chiregai kuramwa, mwana asingaziva anorairwa . . Mukaramwa ndimi munosekwa . . . nhamo yedu vazukuru venyu inhamo yenyu madzitateguru edu; Svikai nepano . . .

Introduction[2]

I begin by invoking the Ancestors because in the African custom, we invoke(d) our Ancestors in most undertakings because *we are because they are*. As Joy James (1993: 31) meditated: 'We must continue to thank our Ancestors, . . . for the ground upon which we stand, for their struggles enabled us to survive . . . dehumanizing oppression.' This culture has for most of Africa, and for Zimbabwe in particular, over the last hundred years been erased in most public spaces in pref-

erence for the "modern" Christian traditions and/or political sloganeering.

I engage this discussion of theorizing the intellectual legacy of Nehanda as a suggestive way of retrieving Ancestral knowledge embedded in Spirit-mediumship in Zimbabwe to read African realities. I focus on the Spirit of Nehanda of Zimbabwe as embodied in its nineteenth century medium, Charwe (henceforth Mbuya Nehanda, unless specified otherwise).[3] Mbuya Nehanda is one of the most popularized of nineteenth century Spirit-mediums who co-led and participated in the 1896-7 revolts against British imperialism in what is today Zimbabwe, and the only woman so memorialized. She, along with other leaders of the rebellion, were captured, "tried" and sentenced to death by hanging for their involvement in the rebellion(s) (Ranger, 1967; Bhebhe and Ranger, 1995, 1996; Lan, 1985; Mazikana and Johnstone, 1984; Weiss, 1986; Hove, 1988; Vera, 1996; Samupindu, 1991). And as is always the case in any discussion of Mbuya Nehanda that I know, the only thing that it rarely evokes is indifference. To this end, I hope this discussion will open up spaces for more discussion into the recollection of African Ancestral knowledge, especially of those not as popularized as Mbuya Nehanda.

As the allegory goes: A group of blind persons touching an elephant gave different renditions of their experience of the elephant from their particular locations. One experienced the elephant by its ear, another by its trunk, yet another by its tail, another by its foot and so on. Disagreements over what the elephant was 'truly' like cannot be overstated; suffice to say that each experience while real was incomplete. It was through the piecing together of each individual version that there was a fuller picture of the 'whole' elephant. I utilize this story to illustrate and emphasize the problematics of power and representation in the knowledge collection, production and dissemination processes in the academy, an academy that been maintaining academic 'standards' predicated on overt and covert racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. Western/Eurocentric[4] (male) culture set the standards for what would count as knowledge, how it would be created, produced and disseminated – essentially passing European male experience(s) of the elephant's tail or ear for the 'whole' elephant. However, this dominance, despite its real and imagined power, has always been met with resistance, and this resistance has not only been on the battle front, as we have been made to believe in dominant historical narratives, but also at the intellectual and spiritual levels, aspects that have generally been underplayed thereby constructing Indigenous peoples as without a vibrant intellectual history.

The first part of the article discusses the problems of language in knowledge production – specifically the English[5] language. For example, what do words mean in one language, what happens to them when they are used in another? As more (of us) Africans participate in the knowledge production industry, the issues of language and the medium of communication become crucial. The English language as the medium of producing knowledge is often taken for granted, particularly the fact that it is a language (and culture) that is benefiting immensely at the expense of African languages and cultures (see also, wa Thiong'o, 1989). The second section critically, albeit briefly, engages the politics of knowledge production in and about Africa. In this section, I raise the question, what is ancestor-worship, and just who is worshipping whom? I use the purposes of two research studies as examples to illustrate that those who claim others engage in ancestor worship/ancestral cults do the same themselves in their work, as they (understandably?) pay homage to their Western scholastic ancestors and traditions in their studies of African realities. The third and last section suggests one of numerous possibilities of re-conceptualizing and theorizing African figures like Mbuya Nehanda. Through this very suggestive discussion, I insist on not only preserving Mbuya Nehanda's legacy, but more importantly, paving paths to retrieve those who – unlike her – remain nameless, faceless and voiceless. The process of reclaiming ancestral knowledge as a source and site of knowledge in a politically independent Africa is key as it is intricately linked to the social, economic, and cultural (r)evolution and development of the continent in this globalizing twenty-first century. My engagement in this topic is reminiscent, aimed at evoking and provoking debate on issues of power in the knowledge production industry, on and about Africa. It is an argument that contributes to the importance of reclaiming Indigenous knowledge[6] systems in the academy, with the main aim of extricating African Ancestors and Ancestral knowledge from the claws of colonizing scholarship. It is to *re-member* the *dis-membered. Re-membering* is critical in resisting the insidious and seductive nature of Western culture and education that still subtly insists on being THE "universal" way of knowing and producing knowledge.

Of Language and the Politics of Language Production

The Politics of the English Language and Knowledge Production in the Academy

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1989: 15) asserts that 'Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history.' This is especially important to take note of because it accentuates the importance of language to the knowledge generation and production processes, particularly in an academy dominated and shaped by

Western language(s) and values. In (so-called anglophone) Africa, because English became the medium education (read schooling), it meant that the process of preserving the 'collective memory banks' of the Africans became a perverted process, as the 'educated' children became the ones to 'teach' their elders, instead of the other way round, or more precisely, a process of give and take between and among generations. What remains to be articulated even more, is how the use of English on things UnEnglish also violated and corrupted those things UnEnglish, because 'English [was] a father tongue; [and] a father tongue is a foreign language; therefore English is a foreign language not a mother tongue' (Philip, 1989: 30).

This father tongueness of English, whenever it was imposed, engendered (and still engenders) an estrangement to the self and to one's own. As wa Thiong'o (1989: 11) and NourbeSe Philip (1989: 32), express so poignantly from their different historical experiences: Philip poetically historicized Caribbean language experiences stating that: '*Every slave caught speaking his native language* [was] *severely punished. Where necessary, removal of the tongue* [was] *recommended. The offending organ, when removed,* [would] *be hung on high in a central place, so that all* [could] *see and tremble*' (italics in original). Wa Thiong'o on the other hand, remembers that 'one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment ... or made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY (capitals in original). Forbidding the speaking of mother tongues meant that people had to stop thinking of themselves as people with an identity other than chattels. This has changed somewhat as Africans have appropriated the same oppressive language to their own ends. But, not all spaces have been as open to English language rule bending. Academia is still a space that marks one as 'different' from village/street language and culture, and the use of 'scholarly English language,' that is, the impersonal, 'objective' and 'unaffected' – probably middle and upper class English – is a prerequisite of 'astute' scholarship. The use of inaccessible and often jargonistic language has been and is still the marker of the 'educated'. Even so-called oppositional frameworks like postmodernism have not been able to evade jargon, because jargon–admitted or not–is a quintessential marker of one's 'education.' Granted, that every space has its own 'inside' language that is not easily accessibly to 'outsiders.' Academic language, however, is a language that alienates even the 'insiders' as a significant amount of contemporary research and literature attests.

A Definition of Terms?

Let us take the definitions of some key terms and concepts that I use in this discussion as exemplars of the politics of language and the knowledge production process in the academy. The term *ancestor,* for example, has an English dictionary meaning of '. . . people from whom one descends . . .. An *ancestor* of something is an earlier thing from which it developed' (Collins Dictionary, 1995:56, emphasis in original). The basic Western sociological meaning does not differ much from this dictionary definition (see Johnson, 1995). On the other hand, the *term* ancestor for some African peoples is either non-existent or has different meanings, meanings that are metaphysical, symbolic, and literal. For instance, Kopytoff (1997: 414) observes that the Suku people of south-western Congo (Kinshasa)

> . . . have no term that can be translated as 'ancestor'. The dead members of the lineage are referred to as *bambuta*. Literally, *bambuta* means the 'big ones', the 'old ones', those who have attained maturity, those older than oneself, collectively, the term refers to the ruling elders of a lineage. A *mbuta* (singular) is, literally, one older than ego (italics in original).

Among the VaShona (of Zimbabwe), a similar reality arises. The term *Mudzimu* (singular and *Midzimu/Vadzimu* plural) in the ChiShona language(s)[7] is usually translated as equivalent to the English *ancestor/ancestors*. It, however, does not easily translate, as *Mudzimu/ midzimu* denotes and connotes a rootedness in the past that is inextricably linked to the present and future; and these three —past, present and future—simultaneously define each other. For the VaShona, *Midzimu* are constantly invoked implicitly and explicitly, They are:

> like a shadow. They follow you wherever you go. Everyone has a *mudzimu* because everyone has a shadow. Each of us is looked after by a *mudzimu*. But we must also look after them. That is why we brew beer and pour it on the ground, to appease and thank our *midzimu* (Vera, 1994: 27).

Not recognizing and acknowledging such fundamental cultural differences means reinforcing colonial and colonizing notions of the "universality" of the English language and culture. To this end, it is incumbent upon those of us Africans who are passionate and interested in Indigenous and Ancestral knowledge to "uncover and recover"[8] our dis-theorized heritage, to reclaim that part of ourselves that has for so long been amputated, an amputation that now serves as self-hatred and self-censorship of the mentally colonized.

Is there an African Culture? [9]

Closely related to the foregoing discussion on language is the term

culture, which I am utilizing as a site of collective memory for African (and indeed all) societies because of its importance in the knowledge generation, production and dissemination processes. As Walter Rodney (1981: 34) simply put it, 'a culture is a [people's] total way of life.' However, most Africans have to contend with the fact that 'one of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture. Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves.' (Biko, 1996: 26).

Steve Biko so insightfully named one of the biggest problems that impinge on African knowledge production by Africans contemporaneously. The claim of an African culture—in all its heterogeneity—raises intellectual temperatures in the academy in ways that a similar claim about Western culture does not. As an increasing number of African (and 'Third World') scholars argue, it has been and is still easy for many White Western scholars to describe 'Other' cultures (Said, 1978; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983); while it is still not as easy for those 'Others' to do the same about Themselves, let alone the Westerner. Also, in contemporary academia, the silencing specter of runaway postmodern[10] theories have taken over the vacuum left by the death of the grand-theory that most purport to critique. Yet, the striking coincidence seems to be that postmodernism rises as (an) appealing theoretical framework(s) at the precise historical moment that Africans (among many historically discriminated peoples, and Indigenous peoples around the world) are retrieving their (Ancestral) tongues, memories and histories. Our recollection projects and calls to cultural accountability are met with claims that we essentialize our people. One wonders, however, *what is more essentialist than white supremacist ideology?*, an ideology that has held human relations at ransom for so long.

For example, Eurocentric constructs label most African conflicts as tribal or ethnic conflict, while Western ones are sanitized in the name of religion or some such holy and/or rational difference. The English and French conflict in Canada, for instance, is constructed as 'sovereignty' *not* tribal or ethnic conflict between Anglo and Franco colonial descendants of Euro-Canadians. All new Canadians (including those with Anglo and Franco colonial histories) find themselves caught in the middle of this conflict, producing a very interesting socio-political dynamic in Canada. Yet seldom, if ever, is reference made to Euro-Canadian ethnic conflict; if anything, ethnicity, in Canada, is always in reference to the African, Asian, South American and most immigrants. And the mother of all European ethnic conflicts played out on African soil is known to this day as the 'scramble and partition' of

Africa *not* the European tribal and ethnic scramble and division of Africa.[11] Such issues are important to highlight as they facilitate in righting the damaging effects that (Eurocentric) schooling imposes on the articulation of African realities even by Africans. We need a new language that can name our contradictions and realities as Africans and facilitate the envisioning of transformation in Africa. Presently, we cannot rely on frameworks borrowed wholesale to resolve our problems, because history teaches us they will not.

The Race for Theory[12]

Lastly, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the term *theory* as it is very important in this discussion of retrieving and theorizing Ancestral knowledge. An English dictionary meaning of the word theory states that: '(1) A *theory* is [an] idea or set of ideas that is intended to explain something. (2) If you have a theory about something, you have your own opinion about it...' (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995:1730). (Euro) Sociologically, 'a theory is a set of logically interrelated propositions and the implications that follow from them, which is used to explain some phenomenon' (Johnson, 1995:296). If theory, then, is 'an idea or set of ideas that explain something;' and 'if you have a theory about something, you have your own opinion about it' does it mean that only the 'brightest' have ideas to explain life's intricate realities? Are the 'brightest' the only ones with opinions on issues that affect people's daily lives? What about the rest of us? I pose these questions in an effort to reclaim theory for those of us who come from cultures (African in my case) whose ideas and opinions on life's realities have been discredited as 'non-theory' and 'superstition' (see also Morrison, 1983; James, 2000). European ideas and opinions defined and shaped what has passed for universal theory in the academy and human relations, especially the *very superstitious idea of white supremacy* and it cannot (subtly) continue.

Re-inserting the practice and language of theory when recollecting Ancestral knowledge means acknowledging that Africans have always theorized, '... but in forms quite different from the Western form of logic.' (Christian, 2000: 12). Reclaiming the practice and language of theory means going beyond mere acknowledgement of our theoretical heritage to participating in the practice by telling our stories and uncovering the colonizing reality that robs us of our intellectual and spiritual heritage. These are legacies that have immensely contributed to and improved the theoretical frameworks of Western academic traditions – like anthropology, biology, sociology, botany, medicine, history, ... – which have not only borrowed this knowledge, but in some cases appropriated it and passed it on as their own – thereby *distheorizing* African Ancestral knowledge. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith

(1999: 39) so poignantly argues about reclaiming Indigenous knowledge among her Maori people; research and knowledge production have to be understood as sites of struggle for Indigenous peoples in order for them 'to escape the penetrating and surveillance gaze of Western imperialism and Western science.' Smith continues to evince that research and knowledge production is a space Indigenous peoples attempt to "reorder and reconstitute" themselves to avert the dehumanization meted out to them and their Ancestors.

To my mind, an attempt to 'escape the penetration and surveillance of the Western gaze' means making our Ancestors and Ourselves subjects of our histories, writing histories that do not always react to a dominant rendition of our realities. To this end there is an urgent need to *re-theorize* our *dis-theorized* Ancestral and Indigenous knowledge. I use dis-theorized because 'the prefix *dis* is added to some words that describe processes, qualities, or states, in order to form words describing the *opposite* processes, qualities and states' (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, 1995: 464, my italics). 'Uncovering and recovering' African ancestral knowledge in the contemporary academy entails engaging the *dis*theorized knowledge of our Ancestors and living communities in order to preserve the future. I also utilize *dis-theorize* (distheorize) to signify the abuse and vandalization of African Ancestral knowledge, knowledge that had evolved and sustained people through generations, and yet has passed for little or nothing – but canon fodder[13] – in the White academy. I insist on using the term in order to describe, analyze and accentuate the 'opposite processes, qualities and states' of African ancestral ontology and epistemologies from those articulated by European and Eurocentric scholars, because: 'at the level of intellectual production, we should recognize that theories are not mechanical tools; they affect (and some will say determine) how we think, who we think about, what we think, and who thinks with us [for] ... intellectual tools ... frame research and thinking (Oyewumi, 1997: 24). Defying colonial and colonizing theoretical frameworks is therefore a necessity in the processes of reclaiming Ancestral knowledge and re-theorizing discredited African knowledge, a knowledge that goes beyond mere survival. It is a call to accountability to the living and spiritualized community that African "scholars" have to engage themselves with and in as we/they reclaim these stolen and vandalized legacies. It is also a call to rupture and broaden the meaning and practice of the notions 'scholar' and 'scholarship' beyond Western parameters that equate schooling with scholarship. My main thesis is, therefore, that the responsibility of African academics (and those seeking to speak with, for and to Africans), is to theorize African experiences from African (ancestral) conceptual and theoretical frameworks and all others—especially Western—as refer-

ence points, *not* the starting point.

Ancestor Worship, Just who is worshipping whom?

This brings me (back and forward) to another crucial point in this discussion – the politics of (language and) naming African realities and experiences via the power of research, in this case, it is the notion of ancestor worship. The most widely known and acclaimed written narratives about African people (among many Indigenous people's) knowledge systems, like 'traditional' religions have, by and large, been written by Western scholars of (primarily) anthropology. The names of Western anthropological ancestors like Branislov Malinowski, Margaret Mead and Edward Evans-Pritchard, to mention but three, loom large, and their writings remain mainstay reading for aspiring anthropologists. The fathers and mother(s) of Western anthropology, among other disciplines, have thus shaped the way African (and Indigenous peoples') way of life has been constructed for Western consumption.[14]

In Zimbabwe, for instance, research on Spirit-mediumship has been done by predominantly white male scholars, such as, D.N. Beach; P. Fry; R. Blake; M.F.C. Bourdillon; M. Gelfand; D. Lan; and T.O. Ranger, among others – a combination of historians, anthropologists and medical doctors.... These scholars have made valuable contributions to the writing of history, sociology, anthropology (among other disciplines) in Zimbabwe, and there is a lot to be learnt from their writings. However, their study of Zimbabwean Spirit-mediumship, has not been informed by (African) Ancestral theoretical frameworks. Instead, it has been from (their) own Western ancestors and academic customs and traditions that they have drawn their inspiration for their work. Let me take two of these studies' theoretical and analytical frameworks as examples of how problematic notions of ancestor worship are in the academy.[15]

The first example is that of Dr. David Lan who for his anthropology doctoral degree (1983) at the London School of Economics (England), did his research on the Dande region of Zimbabwe. He wrote a thesis entitled *Making History: Spirit Mediums and Guerrillas in the Dande Region of Zimbabwe*, which he later expanded and published in 1985 as a monograph entitled *Guns and Rain: Guerrillas and Spirit Mediums in Zimbabwe*. I found his study very engaging yet I realized that his was another study to advance Western anthropological theory and knowledge on and about Africa and Africans. I say this because his theoretical and analytical base is steeped in Western traditions (and rightly so?), and not in those of the Ancestors and people he studied. This is demonstrated in his whole

study, and highlighted in the *Introduction* and *Conclusion* chapters where he wrote, in part:

> The purpose of this book is not primarily to describe *why* the peasants of Zimbabwe offered resistance to the Rhodesian state . . . ,[r]ather, my intention is to describe *one of the forms that this resistance took* . . .(from the "Introduction", p. xviii, italics in original, underlining mine).

> [In conclusion], this study of guerilla warfare has provided an unusual perspective on one of the *classic themes of modern anthropology*: political change at the village level (from the "Conclusion", p. 225, italics mine).

'Rationally' reading through such ethnographic studies is expected academic and professional etiquette, yet it is impossible for some of us to read through these studies with sanitized rationality, because by so doing we become accomplices in our own re-colonization. Sanitized 'rational' readings of such studies runs counter to the spirit of resistance to hegemony (of any kind) that the *Mhondoro*/Spirit mediums stood and stand for on behalf of *Midzimu* / Ancestors. Rather than contributing to Indigenous theory and knowledge production, studies such as these reinforce the dominant perception that anthropological theory has to come from the northern hemisphere–the London School of Economics in this case—while *case studies*—Spirit mediums in Dande —necessarily come from the southern hemisphere. Lan, like the VaShona he studied, was performing his own Western ancestral worship, yet did not conceptualize his own as such. To this the questions become: Who gets what name/title/label, and what are the implications of this naming and labelling to knowledge and power in and outside the academy?

Another study in the same vein is that of Dr. Bourdillon whose ethnography of the VaShona people focuses on religion. This is also a very detailed and insightful study. However, the whole study demonstrates his intended audience, his intellectual heritage and ancestral altars. He wrote, in his introduction to the study:

> The primary aim of this work is to promote *among the white peoples* of Rhodesia a greater understanding of their [B]lack compatriots. Hopefully a complementary study on the whites *for the benefit of the [B]lack people* will one day be produced. There is a danger when a man writes about a people he has met and studied, that the objects of the study lose their humanity. The late *Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard* was very much alive to this danger when he maintained that Social Anthropology should aim to be a humanity rather than a science; it should aim to see and understand the inner man rather than describe outer curiosities. *His is the tradition I should like to follow* (Bourdillon, 1976: 9, italics mine).

What is most curious is why he chose to 'promote among the white peoples of Rhodesia a greater understanding of their black compatriots' instead of doing what he hoped someone else (whom?) would do – that is, 'study the whites for the benefits of Blacks.' The white Rhodesians got first priority, even as they had taken over Africans'/Blacks' freedom and called themselves citizens where they denied the same rights to those Native to the land. Also, it is not in the traditions of any of the African Ancestral Spirits he was studying that he sought to follow in studying the "religion" of the VaShona; instead, it was in the traditions of his own Western ancestor "the late Professor Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard" that he chose to follow. Yet again, ancestral worship is rendered to a Western ancestor and traditions, is not named as such. It would seem that Dr. Bourdillon, though unarticulated as such, was invoking the ancestor—Sir Evans Pritchard—to intervene and make white Rhodesians see reason as it were—his language is 'polished' his academic heritage announced to appeal to white sensibilities. I wondered all the while, will there ever be a time when African Ancestors and standpoints define the frameworks for scientifically or humanistically studying African peoples, or are we to keep relying on the traditions and ancestors of the West?

I use these two examples *not* to discredit the scholarship of the learned men, but to raise the questions, what is ancestor worship, who performs it, and what makes some cultures ancestor worshipping ones and others not? My angst here does not make Lan and Bourdillon's studies invalid or non-valuable. Rather, it shifts the gaze and asks the same questions that they ask of the studied. I also cite these works mostly to pose the question, *just who is worshipping whom here*? For as far as I have been taught and seen it performed throughout my academic career, I do not see a difference between memorializing ('worshipping') Mbuya Nehanda and what has been done in the study of the founding fathers and mothers of many academic disciplines. The exhortation has always been, study the classics in order to grasp the discipline. Why then is African Ancestor worship gazed upon with such curiosity when we are all ancestor worshipping? Why has the study of Ancestors like Mbuya Nehanda been understood in Western terms?

The urgency of re-collecting our histories ourselves—contested and contestable as it may be—cannot be overstated. What we need are African perspectives on the elephant; for the tail is *not* the elephant (and perhaps we need to hear what the elephant has to say for itself). Scholastic voyeurism on our African way of life (including by Eurocentric African scholars) cannot and should not be allowed to flourish any longer. Our Ancestors have waited too long while we have

been busy genuflecting at alien altars, imbibing alien traditions and rituals in the belief (and perhaps the hope) that we would be like the master. It is time to fully engage African knowledge systems so that whatever there is to learn from the African past and present does not inferiorize or erase African spiritual and intellectual legacies, thereby leaving little for future generations to spring from as I suggest in the succeeding section. I explore one of many possibilities of reclaiming our forgotten legacies and legends by theorizing the intellectual legacy of Mbuya Nehanda during the most popularized last moments of her life. This, as I stated at the beginning, is an invitation to retrieve those who—unlike Mbuya Nehanda—remain nameless and forgotten.

'Mapfupa Angu Achamuka . . . My Bones Shall Rise . . .'

In this section, I theorize Mbuya Nehanda's agency by reflecting on her said words and actions during the last four months of her life. I theorize Mbuya Nehanda as a philosopher to draw attention to the fact that there is more to her and to African theoretical traditions than meets the average eye, and those studying African histories and realities would be engaging in intellectual honesty if they start from these traditions before reaching out to western ones – should the need arise. While I will not go into the debates and schools of thought within African philosophy, I shall briefly explain what I mean by philosophy, and why I theorize Mbuya Nehanda as a philosopher. Philosophy as Omorebge (1998: 3) defines it, '... is essentially a reflective activity. To philosophize is to reflect on human experience in search of answers to fundamental questions. Human experience is the source of the reflective activity known as philosophy.' James (1993: 32-33) expands this definition asserting that 'in traditional African cosmology, [philosophers] are initiates in a philosophical system which they channel between the metaphysical and the physical. African philosophy serves both the spiritual and physical needs of the community.' James's reflection is important because it facilitates the understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theory in the production of knowledge. For instance, Mbuya Nehanda by virtue of her position and agency as a Spirit medium, communicated with the living (physical) and spiritualized (metaphysical) communities, reminding each of their responsibilities and promises to each other. Her role as community embodiment has therefore to be re-theorized and honoured—a hundred and three years later—as a voice that still rages against (collective) historical amnesia among her people and especially those in power who have chosen to invent themselves as the heroes (sic) and makers of history in Zimbabwe.

Mbuya Nehanda's Spiritual and Intellectual Agency when All Else Failed

Patriarchal renditions of Mbuya Nehanda's agency have not allowed for fuller explorations of what legacy she left us other than that of physical resistance to colonization (see also, Gaidzanwa, 1992; Vera, 1996). What remains to be fully articulated (among other issues), is why Mbuya Nehanda resisted conversion and baptism to Christianity—and catholicism in particular—as articulated by one Father (Fr.) Francis Richartz,[16] who gave his rendition of Mbuya Nehanda's last days as follows:

> To Neanda I did not speak until evening, in order to avoid a scene, though I had a long and quiet talk with her, which made me even hopeful. However, when in the evening about 6 o'clock I saw her again and in the presence of Victor, who tried his best to persuade her to listen to me, I told her that she had to die the next morning, she began to behave like a mad woman. She took her blankets and wished to leave the cell, and when told to remain and keep quiet, she refused and said she would never endure to be locked up. When I saw that nothing could be done with her I went away with Victor and Neanda began to dance, to laugh, so that the warders were obliged to tie her hands and watch her continually as she threatened to kill herself.
>
> On Wednesday April 27th [1898] I made another attempt to speak to Neanda and bring her to a better frame of mind, but she refused, called her people and wanted to go back to her own country, Mazoe—and die there, and behaved as she had done the night before. When I saw that nothing could be done with her, the time for execution having arrived, I left Neanda and went to Kakubi who received me in good disposition. Whilst I was conversing with him, Neanda was taken out to the scaffold. Her cries and resistance when she was taken up the ladder, the screaming and yelling on the scaffold disturbed my conversation with Kakubi very much, until the noisy opening of the trap-door upon which she stood followed by the heavy thud of her body as it fell, made an end to the interruption.

The foregoing account could, on the surface, pass for another account of White lynching of defiant Black people, except for the distress and seeming bitter despair that haunted the account giver when he repeatedly says *"there was nothing that could be done with her."* The account giver tells of himself—a white male—trying to put some 'sense/reason' into a 'mad' African woman condemned to death. It would also seem that he was hopeful for a breakthrough because—for Catholic priest that he was – the harder and unrepentant the convert, the more pleasing to his god it would be to win that hard-hearted soul. He did not seem to realize that her seeming cooperation that made him 'hopeful' was so he would leave her alone, not that she was 'seeing reason,' and this cannot be under nor overstated. Now, one can

argue that she could have allowed herself to be baptized, what did she have to lose? I would argue there was too much to lose. By accepting another's rites of passage—a dominating other at that—over one's own, would have been nothing short of spirit murder—a murder of one's own personal spirit and that of one's Ancestors. Mbuya Nehanda did what African contemporary men like Nelson Mandela have been honored for—standing by the principles of justice, even when it meant/means death. At the same time, one wonders what made Fr. Francis Richartz so arrogantly convinced that his god was *the* god, his catholic rituals *the* rituals, and that salvation lay with his god, a god that obviously favored the white race since it was their god, their ancestor, and would therefore favor his own.

Mbuya Nehanda's refusal to see white male 'reason,' her disinterest and 'madness,' her 'dance and laughter,' her 'talk' that 'obliged the warders to tie her,' her 'threat to kill herself'—rather than have them kill her—should be understood as the act of defiance by an intellectual of high moral and spiritual standing. The one most distinguishing feature of Mbuya Nehanda's intellectual resistance to worshipping alien ancestors (and gods), was her refusal to persuasion that she convert to Christianity during the four months she spent in custody. This is distinguishing because it is in these last moments that we see her carry her principles through even without the aid of material guns and the moral support of her people. Here we see a Spirit medium transcending guerrilla militancy into the fight for spiritual and intellectual definition; making real the presence of the Ancestors. For Mbuya Nehanda, when bush/guerrilla tactics lost their value because she was a prisoner, she did not give up and give in to the likes of Fr. Richartz's crippling Catholicism, rather, she defied those who captured her by engaging them in the manner they engaged her while in prison – a warfare of the mind and soul. These last months of her life are very instructive in the historical recollection process because they support a contemporary struggle of reclaiming our African rites of passage so Africans can be able to access those metaphysical spaces within ourselves that military warfare did not and cannot touch – that of the mind and soul. Mbuya Nehanda's "talk, screaming and yelling" at the scaffold, according to oral history, include her promise that '*Mapfupa angu achamuka . . . My bones shall rise . . .*,' for, she figured, even though they had taken her body, her Spirit and 'Bones' would inspire future uprisings (see also, Martin and Johnson, 1981; Mugabe, 1983; Lan, 1985; Hove, 1988; Gaidzanwa, 1992). That Spirit and those Bones continue to inspire those who engaged in contemporary resistance to domination—internal and/or external—though the appropriation of her legacy leaves a lot to be desired.

My argument is that if the study of Mbuya Nehanda's legacy is (still) refracted through Western paradigms (by any one), those of us doing such interpretations ought to realize that we are studying another Mbuya Nehanda, for the one of Africa is yet to be conceptualized and theorized from African perspectives. After all, some of us owe our freedom—of spirit, mind and body—to her and the nameless forgotten female and male Ancestors who made possible our freedom. I am not, however, suggesting that all things Western are bad or useless to the African; nor that all things African are good. Instead, I am insisting that there be a privileging of African theoretical frameworks in researching and theorizing things African, borrowing from other traditions as additives not as the central canons. Reading Mbuya Nehanda through alien lenses without even attempting to extrapolate from her own life, is to do Africa's intellectual heritage and Africans a dis-service, for those who forget run the risk of being forgotten themselves.

Keeping Tradition without Being Traditional: The Meaning of Mbuya for Nehanda

Lastly, I turn to my use of the title Mbuya in reference to Nehanda in this article. While some scholars have argued that calling the mediums of Nehanda, especially Charwe, *Mbuya* is feminizing and/or maternalizing the militant figure that she was, we have to scrutinize the standpoints that inform such questioning. While it is critical to have such debates in contemporary times, it is important to remember that most of the historicization of our Ancestors has and is being done in the English language using Western frameworks in the (Western or Westernized) academy. My argument is that it is extremely critical that Mbuya Nehanda (among others) be conceptualized from African perspectives and especially the language(s) in which the experiences occur. The term *Mbuya*[17] in the ChiShona language(s) and culture means grandmother; this ranges from one's own blood grandmother(s) to the larger kinship system where the title is given according to seniority, marriage, *and mutupo*, among other social categories. In the case of the medium of the Spirit of Nehanda, the use of Mbuya before the person's name is a honorific title that acknowledges the Ancestor(s) who speak through the person of the medium.[18] The title therefore denotes a cultural history that is amputated when she is dryly called her Nehanda. If Westerners necessarily protect(ed) and propagate(d) their historical memories, and still keep the traditions of their grandmothers and grandfathers alive, inventing and reinventing them all the while, why should Africans be denied the right to do the same for their own? Why is the head of the Roman Catholic church to date still called the 'holy father,' yet invoking and theorizing Mbuya Nehanda and African Ancestors in everyday life and on special

occasions engenders violent responses, from subtle body language to verbalized disgust on 'backwardness and primitive behavior' to consumptive voyeurism?

I am not insisting on the 'universalization' of Mbuya Nehanda, because fortress building and intellectual conquest is not my intent. My contention is that most (of us) Africans who pride ourselves on our "education" have incurred intellectual and spiritual debts (see also Morrison, 1992) that make it necessary to insist on maintaining (white) standards when the issues of African languages and culture in the academy are broached. What 'maintaining (white) standards' means is that education has to be alien to ensure that there is a marked difference between the 'educated' and the 'uneducated' (see also, wa Thiong'o, 1989; Philip, 1989; James, 1993; Roy-Campbell, 1998). There is a wealth of Ancestral knowledge that lies under-theorized and despised by its own as most of us stampede to excel in Western theories that are constructed as the sign of education *par excellence*. But what this education *par excellence* fails to do is to give the (mentally colonized) educatee an historical memory rooted in one's own knowledge systems, so she/he can be edified by this knowledge and the experiences of extrapolating from it to build new knowledge for contemporary realities. Western scholars faithfully do so for their own ancestors and traditions in the academy, so why should we not do the same with our own—in its richness and limitations? As Kwame Gyekye (1996: 303) entreats: 'It is never too late in human history to start from where one should start (or should have started). [M]odern African philosophers should turn their philosophical gaze on the *intellectual foundations of African culture and experience . . .* ' (italics in original). It is therefore not too late to find theory in African Ancestral knowledge to work from in our intellectual endeavors as others do of their own.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, it is important to emphasize that for many, Mbuya Nehanda is an acceptable historical figure in African (Zimbabwean) history because she fits the image of a sociological male; a strong warrior, a patriot deserving patriotic medallions and honor—and I do not want to minimize this warrior aspect. What is disturbing in this warrior image is that it renders obsolete the deep old spiritual wells she dipped into and drank from. When the militant is touted over and over again, we miss the fact that there was and is more to her than military strategy. Reclaiming Mbuya Nehanda means reclaiming those whose Voices she heeded, Voices still waiting to be re-collected and given their due places in the "new" African social order as people try to make sense of their lives in these trying

times. Reclaiming and re-theorizing Mbuya Nehanda means expanding her words and her life so that they inform our philosophizing today, to enable us to resist re-inscribing hegemony internally and externally in the name of 'progress,' particularly in the academy, in public office and in civic organizations.

Freezing Mbuya Nehanda into a mainly militant mode – the most popularized – denies her and our society of those absolutely indispensable deep wells of historical memory necessary for our contemporary survival, the *madziva* that recharge our idiom, and our agency. Not extrapolating Mbuya Nehanda beyond patriarchal and colonial constructs is to internalize the master's definition that says she was a BLACK WITCH whose time is long gone, and should be forgotten in pursuit of progress and development. Colonial education subjugated African people, putting negative labels on our cultures and indoctrinating us with self-hatred so that the system of colonization has self-perpetuated into the 'postcolonial' era (see also Fanon, 1963). The beauty of it, however, is that it is very reversible (though admittedly painful and long). Ancestral manifestations at individual and collective levels speak of an ancestral need to be remembered, and this is a sign that the deep old wells and rocks that are in our lives have not succumbed to Western cement or dynamite, in and outside the academy. By retrieving the Ancestor(s), we retrieve ourselves, because 'it is when we don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost. When [we] kill the ancestor, [we] kill ourself [and] nice things do not always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection' (Morrison, 1983: 344).

Mbuya Nehanda resisted domination by Whiteness because she knew it was better to survive the scars of resisting domination, or even to die, than to live in perpetual servitude and gratitude. In contemporary interpretation, one would say she understood that it was better to live free than to be eternally grateful for any and every morsel that would be dropped from and by the West: the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank, The European Union, Canadian International Development Agency, United States of America International Development Agency, Multi-National Corporations on our "developing" societies from their First World tables. Participating in praise, singing the wonders of Western traditions—that mock our own—means accepting baptisms that engender unpayable debts, at all levels. To this end, it is important to factor in the issue of language in the production of knowledge about African realities in the academy. Language is crucial to the processes of preserving such knowledge in Africa, because by constantly utilizing English, the act and process of remembering the Ancestors will become an exclusive club of those

with the (academic) tool kits to navigate the jargon minefield. Mbuya Nehanda defied convention, and those of us inspired by her intellectual legacy will do her proud by reclaiming that heritage with unflinching courage. And to her I say:

> Musaramwa Mhondoro yedu, Musadzura, regai midzi iripo. Garirai midzi imerere, rambai makatsika;
>
> Mukaramwa vegodo vanoridza hwamanda vachiti taizvireva. Makambodzvova tikasabvumira here?
>
> Makambodzvova tikasadavira here? Dzvovai doro rebira rebikwe. Dzvovai mhururu, ngoma, mbira nehosho zvibvaruke patswa. Dzvovai tirairwe. Dzvovai tirairike. Dzokai Mbuya musaramwa.

Notes

1. " . . . some experiences demand faithfulness to the language in which the experience happens, [and which] stimulate the impulse" (Philip, 1997: 202); hence no translation for this praise-song.
2. I thank Professor George J. Sefa Dei and three anonymous reviewers for their critical commentary on earlier drafts of this article.
3. There are different variations as to the 'real' name of this medium; some say her name was Charwe (National Archives of Zimbabwe, Mazikana and Johnstone, (1984), while for others use Nyakasikana (Mugabe, 1983; Gaidzanwa, (1992). In this article I use Charwe.
4. I utilize Western and Eurocentric frameworks interchangeably in this essay. However, this does not necessarily mean a racial divide that all white people read it one way, and all black, brown, red, yellow . . . people read it another way. By Eurocentric lenses, I am particularly referring to interpretations that impose a meaning to an experience that has a totally different social register. For a very useful definition of Eurocentrism, see, especially, Samir Amin, (1989).
5. I use the English language/British culture as a colonial example throughout this essay because of the Zimbabwean experiences shared here. Zimbabwe, though tainted and touched by other European colonial relations, was largely shaped by British coloniality.
6. For useful definitions of Indigenous knowledge, see especially, Dei, (2000) and Smith, (1999).
7. For a discussion on ChiShona languages and European languages, see Makoni, (1998).
8. I borrow the phrase from Joy James, (2000: 26).
9. I emphasize again that, in this article, I make particular reference to 'sub-Saharan' Africa and Southern Africa with a specific focus on the VaShona of Zimbabwe.
10. For critiques of postmodernisms see (among others), Lattas, (1993); Collins, (1990); Christian, (2000).
11. See especially, Walter Rodney, (1974). *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa.* Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
12. I borrow this subtitle from Barbara Christian, (2000).

13. See Morrison, (2000).
14. For a critique of western feminism in its rendering of African women's realities, see among many others, Amadiume, (1987); Meena, (1992); Oyewumi, (1997); Nnaemeka, (1997); McFadden, (1998); Charumbira, (1999).
15. Space restrictions do not allow a fuller examination of these studies in this article, but I have done so in other work that is forthcoming.
16. Francis Richartz (1898: 53) The change in the spellings of Nehanda and Kaguvi are from the original source.
17. The same (argument) is true of term *Sekuru* that is Grandfather. Sekuru also means uncle and has multiple variations.
18. A girl child named after its grandmother for example is addressed as Mbuya —the same goes for a boy child; Ancestral Spirits choose anyone, regardless of sex, as their hosts.

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